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ABSTRACT

Research has indicated that the parents of Hispanic high school seniors place enormous emphasis on education and believe that a college education is an essential prerequisite for a good job and comfortable middle-class life style. However, compared to non-Hispanic Whites or African Americans, Hispanics are less likely to obtain higher education degrees. To study this discrepancy, Public Agenda held 8 focus groups with 50 Hispanic high school seniors in all, interviewed parents of Hispanic high school seniors, and interviewed teachers in predominantly Hispanic high schools. Findings show the enormous diversity of the Hispanic population, ranging from students well-prepared for college to those who seemed poorly prepared. A number of "college-maybe" students appeared to be qualified for college but hampered by challenges ranging from lack of financial resources to lack of knowledge of how to proceed. Even among the college-maybe students, some seemed headed for a successful college career. Often the difference seemed to be a teacher, role model, or strong adult in the family who helped them stay on track. The report also contains these commentaries: (1) "Afterword" (Deborah Wadsworth); (2) "Opening the Discussion" (Arturo Madrid); (3) "Building a Consensus for Equity" (Alfredo G. de los Santos, Jr.); (4) "A Challenge and an Opportunity for Policy" (Marlene L. Garcia); and (5) "Low Expectations Equal Low Outcomes" (Jaime A. Molera). (SLD)

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With Diploma in Hand

Hispanic High School Seniors Talk About Their Future

By John Immerwahr

With Commentary by

Marlene L. Garcia
Arturo Madrid
Jaime A. Molera
Alfredo G. de los Santos Jr.

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A Report by Public Agenda

June 2003

National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education
Public Agenda

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Foreword

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and Public Agenda, conducted focus groups in several states to better understand the gap between the high educational aspirations of Hispanic parents for their children and the low educational attainment of Hispanic students. The high parental aspirations were documented in an earlier report by the National Center and Public Agenda, *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African-American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education.*

John Immerwahr moderated the focus groups and prepared this report, which is the most recent in a series of collaborative projects undertaken by Public Agenda and the National Center over the last decade. The series includes national and state public opinion surveys, focus groups, and interviews designed to inform policymaking and to answer basic questions about how the American public perceives and values higher education.

With Diploma in Hand summarizes findings from the focus groups and includes commentaries from national advisory committee members who helped to shape and interpret the project. The purpose of this report is to assist policymakers and educators to better understand the challenges facing Hispanic high school students who attempt, and often fail, to negotiate the maze of financial, organizational, and social obstacles to higher education.

The National Center would like to thank Marlene Garcia, Arturo Madrid, Jaime Molera, and Alfredo de los Santos Jr. for their support and guidance as advisors to the project, including attending focus groups throughout the country and listening to Hispanic students, teachers, and parents discuss their views of higher education. The National Center also thanks Deborah Wadsworth, president of Public Agenda, for her support and insight on this and the many other projects that our organizations have completed together. Her commitment to and respect for the intricate ways in which public views and values inform policymaking in America have contributed greatly to the work of the National Center.

The National Center welcomes the reactions of readers to this and other National Center reports.

Patrick M. Callan
President
National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

Executive Summary

This project began with an enigma. In surveys, the parents of Hispanic high school seniors place enormous emphasis on higher education. By significantly higher percentages than the rest of the population, the parents of Hispanic high school seniors believe that a college education is an essential prerequisite for a good job and a comfortable middle-class lifestyle.[1] But this desire for higher education does not translate into reality. Compared to non-Hispanic whites or African-American students, Hispanic students are much less likely to obtain higher education degrees. There is clearly a gap, in other words, between what Hispanic parents say they want for their children, and the paths those children actually follow.

A number of organizations have called attention to this issue and stressed its significance both for Hispanics and for the nation as a whole. Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education have joined to delve more deeply into this enigma. In order to explore some of the perceptions and attitudes that lie beneath it, Public Agenda conducted a series of eight focus groups with Hispanic high school seniors, interviewed parents of Hispanic seniors, and interviewed teachers in predominantly Hispanic high schools.

This study is a preliminary pilot project, and in the following pages we point to a number of limitations in the research. The observations here should not be read as definitive findings but rather as hypotheses for further study. Even so, we are convinced that the themes emerging from this study are compelling enough to warrant broader discussion and more definitive research. Among the most important themes are:

1. **Diversity among the Hispanic population**. Although Hispanics are often treated as a single demographic category, we found enormous diversity among the Hispanic respondents we interviewed. They spanned a variety of national and cultural heritages, and came from all economic strata. This diversity is reflected in the college plans of the Hispanic high school seniors we interviewed. Even the relatively small number of seniors interviewed for this project reflected the broad diversity of the nation as a whole. Some youngsters resembled other college-prep students from upper-middle-class

[1] John Immerwahr with Tony Foleno, *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African-American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education* (San Jose, CA: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and Public Agenda, 2000).

families nationwide; for them, college attendance was a foregone conclusion. Others appeared to come from impoverished, unstable families with no tradition of college attendance. Many of these young people seemed poorly prepared academically, and, by their own report, had little likelihood of attending college in the near future. Others—whom we have called the "college-maybes"—seemed poised to move on to higher education, but were hampered by a variety of obstacles. Youngsters in the "college-maybe" category offer the greatest opportunity for increasing Hispanic success in higher education.

2. **Obstacles.** Many of these college-maybe students appear to be academically qualified for college work, but they also struggle with challenges ranging from lack of financial resources to a sometimes stunning lack of knowledge of the rules of the game. Many of these young people were the first generation (or even first member) of their family to have an opportunity to attend college. Many seemed to lack the comfortable financial resources of more upscale students. That alone is an enormous obstacle, even in areas of the country where college fees and tuitions are comparatively low. But the students we talked to also struggled with less tangible difficulties that may account for many of the choices these students make about college. Some of the most important are:

   - *Little adult supervision.* Many of the college-maybe students we interviewed had little knowledge of higher education and no direct or clear adult guidance in making educational choices. In many cases, their parents knew little about higher education. The students' schools, teachers, and counselors did not appear to be filling the void. Based on the focus groups completed, it appears that some educators may be failing these students, providing little guidance about higher education or, according to some of the students we spoke with, not even showing much interest in their futures.

   - *Misinformation.* Absent strong adult guidance, we found that the students we interviewed were often shockingly misinformed about higher education. This misinformation ranged from confusion about things like how to apply to college to broader misperceptions of higher education, such as a view, among several of the young people we interviewed, that higher education is only useful if a young person has already decided on a particular career.

- *Competing options.* Many of the students we spoke with were already working 20 to 40 hours a week, or had other work options (such as military service) available to them after graduation. These alternatives were, at least in the short run, more attractive to some students than the prospect of further education.

- *Poorly informed choices.* The combination of minimal adult supervision and misinformation often caused the students we interviewed to make poorly informed choices about higher education, choices that might result in a student never completing a higher education degree. While their choices might make sense given their available information, some of their decisions seemed to close doors and limit their future prospects unnecessarily.

3. **Success stories.** Still, even among the college-maybe students, we met a number who did appear to be headed for a successful college career. At least when we spoke with them, some were well on their way, with a college selected, an admissions letter, and appropriate financial aid. Often, the difference seemed to be a teacher, a role model, or a strong adult in the family who helped them stay on track. But for other Hispanic youngsters, no one seemed to be playing this role in their lives.

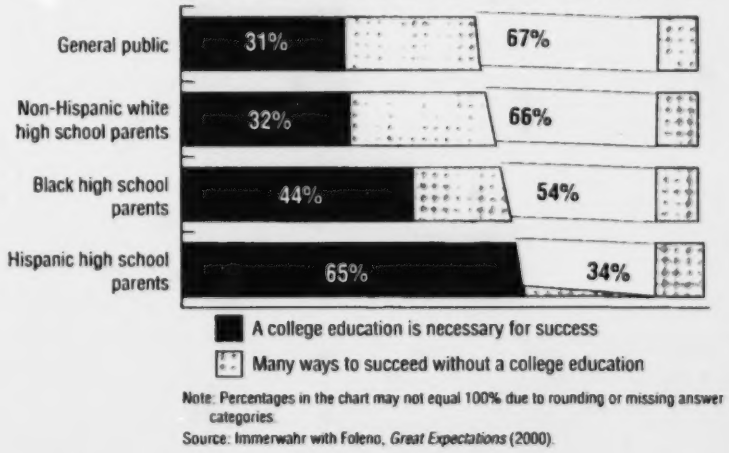
Introduction: The Context for this Study

In 2000, Public Agenda conducted an extensive survey of the attitudes of the parents of high school students on the topic of higher education for the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.[2] Perhaps not surprisingly, the study found that parents across the country place great emphasis on a higher education for their children. A miniscule three percent of the parents say that a college education is not that important for their own child. Yet, while almost all parents today place great value on higher education, Hispanic parents are even more likely to endorse its importance.

In the survey, we asked parents, for example, if college is necessary for success in today's world, or if there are still many paths to success without college. Despite their support of college education for their own children, only about a third of non-Hispanic white parents say that it is impossible to succeed without going to college. In other words, the majority of non-Hispanic white parents (63%) say that there are still many ways to succeed without going to college. In focus groups, non-Hispanic white parents often illustrate this by mentioning entrepreneurs (e.g., Bill Gates), or highly successful people in fields such as sales or entertainment. By contrast, Hispanic parents are much more likely to see college as an absolute necessity, with nearly twice as many Hispanic parents saying that it is virtually impossible to make it in today's world without a college education (see figure 1).

Figure 1

Do you think that a college education is necessary for a person to be successful in today's work world, or do you think that there are many ways to succeed in today's work world without a college education?



Note: Percentages in the chart may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

Source: Immerwahr with Foleno, *Great Expectations* (2000).

A Gap Between Intentions and Reality

When we look at the actual rates of college participation, however, a completely different picture emerges. A recent study by the Pew Hispanic Center shows that while many Hispanic high school graduates eventually enroll in some form of college, most Hispanic high school graduates make choices that are less likely to lead to the completion of a bachelor's degree. In many cases,

[2] Ibid.

they delay college attendance rather than going on to college immediately after graduating from high school, they pursue their studies only on a part-time basis, or they go to a community college rather than a four-year institution.[3] The result is that, although Hispanic parents are more likely to emphasize the importance of getting a college education, Hispanic students are significantly less likely to complete either a two-year or a four-year degree.[4]

Although Hispanic parents are more likely to emphasize the importance of getting a college education, Hispanic students are significantly less likely to complete either a two-year or a four-year degree.

The chief goal of this series of focus groups was to explore possible reasons for this discrepancy between intentions and reality in the Hispanic community. We hoped that by holding in-depth conversations with high school seniors, we could form hypotheses about how and why they make the choices they do about their educational plans. We also were able to build on several earlier Public Agenda studies among African-American families and among families in different economic circumstances.

The Methodology and its Limitations

The observations presented in this report should be considered hypotheses for further exploration and research, not definitive findings. They are tentative for several reasons. Perhaps most important is that they are based on focus-group research, rather than on large-scale, random-sample surveys. Focus groups can be enormously useful tools for observing how people talk about issues and for generating hypotheses for further research. However, they are not reliable predictors of how many people hold a particular viewpoint, or in this case, how common some of the attitudes we describe really are among Hispanic high school seniors.

Second, our observations are limited because they rely mainly on the perceptions of high school students who may or may not have a full and accurate grasp of their own college potential. In focus groups, for example, a student sometimes appeared to have college potential because he or she seemed alert and intelligent, and reported good grades in high school; however, we did not verify the student's academic record or talk to the teachers. And, because our conversations took place in the "public setting" of a focus group, we did not ask any of the probing follow-up questions that we might normally include in a confidential telephone survey.

A last caveat is that, in this study, we talked only to Hispanic students and parents, so we have no way to compare what they said to what we might hear

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[3] Richard Fry, *Latinos in Higher Education: Many Enroll, Too Few Graduate* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center, 2002), pp. v-vi.
[4] Ibid., p. 7.

from youngsters in other population groups. Specifically, we do not know whether these findings are a result of class or of ethnic background. Indeed, we believe that many of the factors we found may be equally true of youth from working-class and poverty-level families, regardless of ethnic or racial background. We have interviewed parents of high school students in connection with other research projects, so, to a limited extent, we were able to draw on that material for comparisons.

In total, we interviewed 50 high school seniors, in San Antonio, Santa Clara (California), Tucson, Chicago, and New York. While the majority of those students were of Mexican ancestry, we also talked to students whose families had come from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Central America. All of the students were seniors who said they were expecting to graduate from high school. Some were planning to go to college in the fall, others were not. We also interviewed a group of 14 teachers in San Antonio and 4 parents of high school seniors in Tucson. All of the interviews were conducted in May of 2002.

During this study, we worked closely with an advisory group of educators (see sidebar) who helped us formulate our interview strategies and who observed the first sets of groups from behind a one-way mirror. Their commentaries, which explore the implications of our findings, are included at the end of this report.

Advisory Group Members

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Enormous Diversity Among Hispanic High School Students

The first, perhaps not very surprising, observation that emerges from our interviews is that, as far as higher education is concerned, the term "Hispanic" does not really describe a group with a unified set of characteristics or a prevailing set of attitudes. We found an enormous range of diversity among the people we interviewed. While some of the students we interviewed were themselves immigrants who spoke Spanish at home, others came from families who had been in the United States for generations. Our respondents traced their heritage to a variety of countries, including Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and the countries of Central America. Some came from well-to-do families where both parents had been to college and graduate school, others came from poverty-level or working-class families where neither parent had finished high school.

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This diversity of backgrounds seems to be reflected in the choices that the young people make concerning their plans after graduating from high school. For the purposes of our discussion, we can divide the students we talked to into three broad groups: "college-prep" students (typically coming from middle-class families) who are poised for an easy transition to higher education immediately after graduation; "non-college-bound" students, often from working-class families, who display little chance of going to college in the near future; and the "college-maybes," students who share many of the same obstacles as the non-college-bound students, but who appear to have more of the academic preparation needed to go on to college directly after graduation.[5]

1. College-Prep Students

Many of the students we talked to resemble college-bound students from any affluent middle- or upper-class suburb in the country. Their parents and their guidance counselors have always expected them to go to college, and they and all of their friends are firmly on the college track. By May of their senior year (which is when we met them), they had typically looked over some colleges, applied to one or more, and had an acceptance letter in hand. Many were personally a bit murky about how all of this would be paid for, but they did know that college would be financed mostly by parental contribution and financial aid. Many also expected that they may have to work during the year and in the summer to help out.

David, one of the fathers we spoke with in Tucson, offers a glimpse into the attitudes and values of this kind of family. David was born in the United States, as were his parents. The oldest of his three children is a senior at one of Tucson's large public high schools. He owns a telephone maintenance company and also does consulting. In his spare time he is very active with his children's sports teams. He described his oldest son this way:

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[5] After our study was completed, the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute released a report that made a very similar distinction. They also settled upon three groups, which they called "the endowed," "the challenged," and the "positive outliers." They saw this last group, which we call the college-maybes, as the most important focus of efforts to improve college attendance and completion rates for Hispanics. Louis G. Tornatzky, Richard Cutler, and Jongho Lee, *College Knowledge: What Latino Parents Need to Know and Why They Don't Know It* (Claremont, CA: Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, April 2002), p. 6.

> *Our son will graduate with honors on Tuesday. He's already been accepted and he's going to Arizona State in their aerospace engineering program. He's also in their Air Force ROTC program. He wants to work for NASA. I'm absolutely thrilled. On July 11th he leaves for Europe for three weeks, then he'll be home two days and then he goes away to school. He's currently taking AP courses. He's also taking a course or two at the community college to get freshman credit. All of his friends are going to college too. He has a friend going to Stanford, he's got a couple of friends going to the University of Arizona, and the others are going to other places.*

For David, there has never been any question about whether the boy, Jason, was going to college. We asked David what he would have said to Jason if the young man had announced that he was not going to college in the fall. David replied: "If you like the car you drive and the place you live, you are going where we tell you."

What is most striking about this group is how much they resemble upscale families from other ethnic groups whom we have interviewed in connection with other projects. While David and his family may have a number of distinctly Hispanic cultural characteristics, when it comes to sending their children to college, their approach is very similar to what we have seen in focus groups with upper-middle-class families nationwide.

Although these college-bound students were definitely headed to college, we also saw a desire, among some of them, to ease the transition. Several of the students we talked to wanted to go to college close to home, or even to live at home for the first year. Others stressed that they wanted to start in a community college for the first two years, to stay closer to home and to save money. This is consistent with other research that shows that Hispanic students are more likely than other groups to choose two-year institutions.[6]

What is most striking about this group is how much they resemble upscale families from other ethnic groups.

2. Non-College-Bound Students

In the focus groups, we also talked to students (and heard about others from their friends and teachers) who, at least in the near term, do not appear to be going to college after high school. Among this group, many seemed to lack the academic skills, work habits, and sense of direction and focus that going to

[6] Fry, *Latinos in Higher Education*, p. 6.

college requires. In many ways, these students are the reverse image of the college-prep students. Most have attended high schools for which college enrollment after high school graduation is not the norm. In some cases, the young women already have children and some of the young men we spoke to have already had brushes with the criminal justice system. Typically, their parents have low educational attainment and low-paying jobs. Some of the students are from single-parent homes, and they have attended many different schools, as their parents moved from neighborhood to neighborhood. Here are a few comments from students in this category:[7]

> *I went to a lot of different elementary schools, five or six. Middle schools? Went to two of them. My family moved all of the time.*
>
> *Female, Tucson*

> *My mom works almost every day, many hours. So she really isn't there. I'm home by myself every day. I don't live with my dad, my parents are divorced. My dad, we don't really talk to each other much. . . . I agree college is important. It's not that I'm not smart, I'm too lazy. Like almost every kid, I would rather do something other than read a book.*
>
> *Male, Chicago*

> *College was a thought when I was a freshman in high school. I was playing football and I was like maybe I can get a scholarship for college as a football player. Then I got in fights in school with all the little preppy whites. I had time off from school. Then I'd go back to school and then go to work because we didn't have money for all of us to sit around the house and do nothing. As I went more through high school I looked at it, it ain't an option for me. I'm not wanting to go to college.*
>
> *Male, Tucson*

> *My friend isn't going to college next year. She's going to DR [Dominican Republic]. She's going to raise her child there, she has a baby.*
>
> *Female, New York City*

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[7] As anyone who works with high school students can attest, young people sometimes give rather short answers to questions about their future. Some of the quotations are actually the answer to two or three questions from the moderator. To increase the readability, we have often omitted the moderator's questions and, sometimes, have edited or amplified the quotations to make the meaning clear.

My decision was I went to jail. I spent a year in the house for being set up for something I knew I shouldn't have done. There I was. Then the day came that I got out. I had over 200 hours of community service. The only place that would let a parolee do community service was my grandfather's work. It's hard work throwing asphalt around but you lose a lot of weight from it. He said if I can graduate from high school I could go into his business. So that is what I will do. I didn't want to go to college, I just wanted to get through high school. The campuses are too big and too many people.

Male, Tucson

Yet, even among this group of low-achieving, high-risk youngsters, virtually all were well aware of the expectation that successful high school graduates go on to college. Perhaps like troubled students everywhere, they had found ways of avoiding the painful reality of their situation. In some cases, they told us that they were going to college, but when questioned about the specifics, it became clear that they really had no concrete plans to do so. One said, for example, "I'll start college in late fall" (but, of course, most colleges start in August or September). One student from Tucson who was graduating from high school at age 21 explained that he would be going next fall to the University of North Carolina, although he had not applied to that institution.

Other students dealt with the college issue by saying that they were planning to go to college, but that they were going to "take some time off." Other students told us, however, that "taking a year off" really means "not going to college." As one female student from Chicago explained:

A lot of people say they'll take a year off because you want a break from school after 18 years of it. Most people that take a year off usually get a full-time job and they never go back to thinking about college.

By the time we talked to many of these young people, in other words, college in the near future had already been excluded as a realistic option.

By the time we talked to many of these young people, in other words, college in the near future had already been excluded as a realistic option. Either social conditions, the failure of the educational system, or their own choices had created situations where they had little hope of educational attainment beyond the high school diploma. Some of these students struck us as extremely bright. One young man had dropped out of school in the eighth grade, but then passed a G.E.D. exam with no preparation whatsoever. But for most of these students, our observation was that massive intervention—both academic and social—would be required for them to launch a successful college career any time soon.

3. The College-Maybes

A third group of students fell between the affluent, college-prep students and those students for whom college (at least next fall) seemed a remote possibility. These students shared some of the characteristics of the non-college-bound students. Typically, their parents, usually immigrants, had not gone to college themselves (or even completed high school). Generally, they did not come from high schools where all of their friends and classmates were going to college as a matter of course. At the same time, these students seemed better prepared for college than the at-risk group we described above. From what we could tell, they were doing well in school, and their families hoped that they would go to college. Still, they were hardly uniform in their decisions. Some were headed for college, others were exploring other possibilities.

Changes in Hispanic higher education participation rates are likely to come, at least initially, from students who resemble these college-maybes.

This college-maybe group struck us as particularly important from a policy perspective. Changes in Hispanic higher education participation rates are likely to come, at least initially, from students who resemble these college-maybes. As we will see, there are obstacles that make college attendance more difficult for this group but we also heard some inspiring success stories.

Obstacles to College Attendance and Completion

Obstacle One: Children in Charge

In talking to the college-maybes, one of the most surprising things about these high school seniors was the degree to which they, in contrast to the college-prep students, seemed to be required to do all of the decision making about their educational future themselves, with very little adult support. Interestingly, many of them reported that they received little attention or advice from their high school guidance counselors. A few comments:

> *Moderator: Did you meet with a counselor and talk about taking the classes you are taking?*
>
> *We just got to pick whatever classes we wanted, which was pretty cool.*
> *Male, Tucson*
>
> *I just took a lot of electives. Then I figured I needed to take catch-up classes for college. My counselors never told me that I needed to retake English II the*

second semester and I needed a Spanish class. They never told me so I had to figure it out on my own with the college recruiter.

Male, Santa Clara

Many of the students said that they had talked to their parents, but it also seemed clear that the parents themselves often didn't have very detailed information about higher education, or even about the specifics of what happens in high school. One mother in Tucson described her own situation:

I'm not too involved, so I don't know how she picks her courses. She comes home with a schedule. All I know is that she does well. I am not sure what math class she is taking. She wants to go to college but I think she wants to settle down and stop moving. I think if we would do that and she senses some stability in her life, then she will want to go.

When the students told us about their plans, we sometimes asked them what they had based the information on. Often the source of information was what they heard from other students, older siblings or cousins, or a family friend. One student described how she knew what courses to take to prepare her for entrance into a nursing program:

I have friends whose wives are nurses and they said you need this, this, and this. You get more from your friends than from school.

Female, Santa Clara

Many students reported that they had based their information on what they had heard from another young person. For these students, the final decision was one that, in their words, they had worked out for themselves, based on wherever they could gather the information.

Obstacle Two: Conflicting Signals from Teachers

Several of the college-maybe students whom we interviewed painted a picture of schools where teachers had low expectations of them and little interest in whether they went on to higher education. In some ways, this perception was confirmed by the high school teachers whom we interviewed.

We interviewed a group of high school teachers in San Antonio, Texas. All of the teachers taught in high schools with a large proportion of Hispanic students, and several of the teachers were themselves Hispanic. In many ways,

what we heard from the teachers was rather discouraging. These teachers were clearly overwhelmed by some of the problems that they were facing in their own daily experience. Much of their conversation involved sharing "horror stories" about their students and their families. A few examples:

> *What bothers me is the mothers back away from problem boys, throw their hands in the air and say, "I don't know what to do with him," as if they have no power. The girls don't seem to think a thing in the world of getting pregnant when they're 13 or 14 years old. The kids who bring their babies to school to show them off don't get it that this might not be the best choice they could make for their life. Mostly those are Hispanic kids and of them a lot are the Mexican kids.*
>
> *Teacher, San Antonio*

> *The parents provoke this. They want their daughters to get pregnant. We had a girl not too long ago who was all upset because she had a terrible fight with her mom because her mom wanted her to get pregnant and she didn't want to. They encourage this: "Don't worry about the baby, I'll take care of it for you."*
>
> *Teacher, San Antonio*

> *When I ask, "What are you going to do when you finish school?" they say, "We'll just get on welfare." So sometimes I'm thinking that's an out for them. I try to encourage my students to focus on something, whether a job after high school, going into the military.*
>
> *Teacher, San Antonio*

> *There's a real shortsightedness. It's how much money they make in a week. They don't think in terms of a career where they would make this much a year. They think of a job where they make this much by the hour.*
>
> *Teacher, San Antonio*

> *Some Hispanic parents have dropped out of school so they don't have the education and they don't feel comfortable coming to the school. We use language they don't understand; we use acronyms they have no idea what we're talking about. So they're lost. Plus, if they had a bad experience at school and felt they didn't have the language, or they dropped out, then they're afraid to come to school and they don't push school. They say, "If you don't want to go to school today because you don't like that teacher, that's fine."*
>
> *Teacher, San Antonio*

While it is impossible to generalize from one group of teachers in one city, what we heard was rather consistent with what we heard from some of the students. The teachers appeared to be so preoccupied and discouraged that they had little energy left for those students who really had a chance at further education. Rather than being concerned about how to help students make better choices about higher education, the teachers we talked to said, almost universally, that the real problem was that their Hispanic students did not have enough opportunities to pursue post-high school vocational training. Together, the teachers and the students paint a picture in which adults often don't have the time or interest—perhaps because they have too many other problems—to focus on students who could be supported to make better choices about higher education.

Together, the teachers and the students paint a picture in which adults often don't have the time or interest to focus on students.

Obstacle Three: Misinformation

Anyone who has worked with high school seniors knows that they can be surprising both in what they know and what they don't know. While today's teenagers are often remarkably sophisticated about some subjects, they can be poorly informed about other areas. Like teenagers from every age, they sometimes speak with equal confidence about things they understand and subjects they don't know so well.

In this respect, the Hispanic college-maybe students we talked to seemed fairly typical of high school seniors everywhere in that they were, in many cases, poorly informed about higher education. A conversation with a young woman in Chicago offers a sample of what we heard over and over again. She was hoping to attend one of the Illinois state universities. She had not applied yet, but she assured us that she did not need to apply until the end of the summer. When asked how she knew, she said:

> *My high school took some of us up there last February, and I was worried about whether or not I could apply still, and I discussed it with the tour guide. It was a random question and he explained it. Because it is a state college they give you time to decide, so you can apply in the fall or at the end of summer.*

Afterwards, we called the university's admissions office, and learned that the actual deadline for fall applications is July 1. From the young woman's perspective, she had gotten advice from someone who was familiar with the school (a student tour guide) and she assumed that the information was correct. Apparently, her parents had also accepted this information—assuming that

they had been told of it. More affluent, more educationally savvy parents (or teachers or guidance counselors) might well have questioned whether a student tour guide's word should be accepted as a definitive source of information.

Another young woman from San Antonio confidently told us that, after taking a year off after high school, she would be attending "Boston Law," which she described as a college in Boston for people who want to be lawyers. She was surprised that the moderator had never heard of it, and she seemed entirely unaware that the typical path to a law career is to enter law school after completing four years of undergraduate study. Presumably, what she had in mind was Boston University Law School.

The college-maybe students were also poorly informed about financial aid.

The college-maybe students were also poorly informed about financial aid. California, for example, has recently expanded the Cal Grant program, which is intended to target resources and efforts to prospective college students. The federal financial aid application (FAFSA), which must be completed as part of the application process for the Cal Grant, also determines eligibility for virtually all other state and federal aid. We talked to several students in California who said they were definitely planning on a college career and who appeared to be good candidates for a Cal Grant. Yet several had never heard of the program. (After the focus group, one of our advisory board members who had observed the group from behind a one-way mirror told these students how to get the application, and wrote down the Web site for them).[8]

Obstacle Four: Other Seemingly Attractive Alternatives

Another factor that draws young people away from college is the attraction of paid work right after high school. Many of the students whom we interviewed already had jobs, and teachers in the focus groups emphasized that many of their students work for 20 or even 40 hours per week. As the teachers described it, high school graduation often represents an opportunity to work more hours and make more money at the same place where the student is already employed.

One youngster we talked to in Tucson explained it this way. His family had started a landscaping business, and during high school he was working in the

[8] The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute study came to a similar conclusion by interviewing the parents of Hispanic students. The study developed a "mini-test" of basic information about college education. They found, "College knowledge was objectively low among the Latino parents surveyed. A majority could be considered as having failed the mini-test of college knowledge, as 65.7% of the parents missed at least half of the rather straightforward information items."

landscaping company as well. His intention, upon completing high school, was to move directly into the family business.

> *Landscaping is a full-time job, seven days a week, anywhere from 8 to 16 hours a day. There is just no time. Once I take it over, there is no time for me to go to college.*

When we tell one of these students to go to college we are, in effect, saying: "Don't take the full-time job that is available right now. Instead, stay out of the workplace for four more years, while you spend your own money or take out loans. After the four years are over, you will get a job in a field you aren't even thinking about right now, and make much more money than you would have if you had started working."

The upper-middle-class Hispanic parents we spoke to completely bought into this way of thinking, and indicated that they would be extremely distressed if their sons or daughters proposed taking a job rather than going to college. While this argument seems straightforward and plausible to a middle-class parent, it is not difficult to see that it might not seem so appealing to a youngster who did not personally know many people who had taken this route. The argument to go to college depends on a willingness to delay short-term earnings for the possibility of greater long-term earning potential. This is sometimes a hard enough concept for young people from middle-class families to grasp, but can really be a leap of faith for the first person in the family to graduate from high school.

Obstacle Five: College Is for Specialized Training

One of the most striking findings from *Great Expectations*, our national survey of parents and the general public about their attitudes about higher education, is the degree to which a college education has replaced the high school diploma as the basic admission ticket into the workforce. Many of the parents interviewed for that study might prefer to see their child aiming for a specific career goal from day one of college, but they also recognized that a young person needs to go to college even if he or she does not have a specific career goal. Parents and friends still say, "Liberal arts major; what are you going to do with that?" Yet, they have come to accept that college is a place where students find careers, in addition to being trained for a career they have already selected.

Many of the college-maybe Hispanic students we interviewed held a different vision of high school and college. Many regarded a high school

diploma in the same way more upscale families regard a college degree. For them, the high school diploma was the proof of a general education. They viewed college education in much the same light that more affluent families might regard professional or graduate school, as a path specifically designed to prepare a student for a particular career. But the idea of going to college without a specific career goal in mind made little sense to some of our college-maybe high school students. Their statements tell the story:

> *I know people who are like, "You go to college for two years and take refresher courses and classes that you're interested in until your junior year of college until you think of a major." Why waste two years of college just taking refreshers when you just got out of high school?*
>
> *Female, Chicago*

> *That's a waste of time if you go to college not knowing what you want to do. What if you spend a whole year thinking of a major and then you realize you don't like it? You waste another year on something else. You should go when you've decided what you want to do.*
>
> *Female, New York City*

> *This summer I'm going to work. I'm going to take a semester off. My parents are kind of okay with it. I told them, if I don't know what I'm going to do why am I going to college and have you pay with me not knowing what I'm going to do?*
>
> *Male, New York City*

Again, this perception makes good sense given the framework adopted by these students, but it is rather different from the "go to college to find a career" mentality that is more typical of some upscale families. Our sense, based on previous research, is that many middle-class families think that the lack of a college degree in itself can endanger the hopes and dreams that they have for their children. While Hispanic parents on surveys say that a college degree is essential for success, some Hispanic students do not have the same urgency about that path.

Obstacle Six: Poor Choices

The result of these obstacles often means that the students end up making poorly informed choices. While these students may be no more ill-informed

than other teenagers, they apparently lack the presence of an adult who will gently (or, if necessary, firmly) correct them and get them back on the right track. As a result, they risk making pivotal, life-changing decisions based on inadequate and sometimes misleading information.

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For example, one high school senior in New York told us that he had decided not to go to college in this country but to go to the Dominican Republic for his higher education. His plan was somewhat complicated:

> *I want to be a psychiatrist. There's this program in the Dominican Republic that goes along with the United States. I go there for only four or four and a half years, come back up and take the test. Then I'm already on my way to being what I want to do. I'm going to get my doctor degree from down there but then I'll convert from the Dominican Republic to be a psychiatrist having a practice here. My aunt came up to me with this because one of my uncle's friends is a doctor and he was telling me his friend went down there.*

There may be good reasons for his choice, but he will certainly not return to the United States in four years as a licensed psychiatrist. Ideally, he should make choices about his future educational plans with a better grasp of the options and the pros and cons of his alternatives.

We also talked to a number of students who were planning to enlist in the military shortly after graduation. Since several of these students seemed to be academically promising, we asked them why they were choosing to enlist directly rather than to go to a college ROTC program. One student explained to us that ROTC was like "the boy scouts" and that he wanted to be a marine aviator, and that the fastest way to do that was to enlist directly in the Marines and then go to college while serving in the Marines. Others felt that they could not afford to go to an ROTC program but, when asked, admitted that they hadn't really inquired about scholarship possibilities. In one of the focus groups, we asked a student who was planning on enlisting, "Let's suppose you had a friend who was also interested in the military, and suppose she went to a college ROTC program while you enlisted directly. After ten years, which of you would be further ahead in the service, you or the college grad?" The young woman answered: "I have no idea, but it's a good question."

Obviously from the perspective of a high school senior, direct enlistment can seem like a faster path to a successful military career. From the student's perspective, it makes sense to start in the service right away, doing the college work later. Certainly there are cases where direct enlistment makes more sense than ROTC, but the typical path to being an officer is, in fact, through an ROTC

program. These students may have been making the right decisions for themselves, but they certainly had not explored the alternatives.

Other students told us that they were planning to go directly into full-time work, rather than "wasting" their time on an education that did not lead directly to a career. Still others were headed to trade school or other programs, about which they seemed to know very little, but which they were convinced would lead them into good jobs. What was disturbing was not so much the decisions, but the fact that they were being made with so little information.

What was disturbing was not so much the decisions, but the fact that they were being made with so little information.

These findings are only the result of discussion with a few students; it is important to study these issues further to see if, in fact, schools, counselors, and teachers often fail to address the needs of Hispanic young people when it comes to planning for higher education. Because these students' parents are less likely to have been to college than other parents, and therefore may not be knowledgeable about higher education in this country, these students need much more adult intervention and direction than most students. But while they may need more guidance from well-informed adults, the ones we talked to seemed to be getting very little of it from their schools.

Obstacle Seven: Limited Grasp of Planning and Organization, and a Lower Sense of Efficacy

We observed something interesting about the diversity of Hispanic youngsters from our efforts to recruit young people to participate in our focus groups. On the surface, participation in a focus group would seem to be an attractive opportunity for a high school senior. Typically, the students were offered $50 for a two-hour session, and the sessions generally took place at familiar places such as a local mall. The recruiters had no trouble identifying young people who agreed on the telephone to attend the sessions. Typically, the recruiters called the respondents several times to reconfirm and make sure the respondents did not forget the sessions.

When the time came for the actual groups, we found excellent attendance from the college-prep students. They sat politely around the focus-group room, often with their cell phone on the table next to their car keys. At the same time, many of the students from poor and working-class families just didn't show up at all. When the recruiters called the missing students to see if they were on their way, they heard things like: "I couldn't get a ride," "I couldn't get there on time, and I was afraid that if I got there late I wouldn't be paid," or "I forgot about it." We had to step up our efforts significantly to recruit these youngsters. In one case, we found that the most successful

approach was to stop young people in the mall just before the group, and offer them $50 right then and there.

In a small way, attending a focus group is analogous to going to college. It requires planning, discipline, follow-through, and resources (a car, or a bus token). It also requires a certain amount of trust—that there really will be a focus group and that the student really will be paid. While a working-class student might be more enticed by the incentive, he or she might be less likely to have the organizational ability and faith to actually attend the focus group. Without wanting to belabor the point, our initial difficulties in recruiting college-maybe students (we eventually talked to a good sample of them) may point to some of the difficulties these students face in applying to and eventually attending college. It may be that students in these situations are less likely to have the resources, support, motivation, discipline, and/or faith in the system to accomplish a goal, even when they see the attractiveness of the incentive.

Success Stories

We did hear some wonderful stories about young people for whom one adult had made a difference. One young man told us that he had just won a four-year scholarship to one of the campuses of the California State University. In middle school, he had become very interested in music, and his high school music teacher had spotted and nurtured his talent, and helped him apply for the scholarship. A young woman from Tucson talked about how she became inspired by an ongoing work relationship with adults in an advertising agency.

> *My junior year my teacher forced us to make a career project. You had to job-share with somebody. I've always liked commercials and advertising so I keep my eye out for what is good and what is cheesy. Maybe I would have done that ad, or maybe that slogan doesn't work. So my teacher and I hooked me up with this agency. I've been with them ever since, and that's how I got involved with it. They were so nice to me. They liked my ideas and stuff; I have fresh ideas. I'm kind of like the baby of the agency. It's kind of like off and on, it's not really like a job-job, I just go and listen to what's going on. Sometimes they'll call me in if they need me to translate things or go to different meetings and stuff.*

Other students talked about the influence of a parent, or other strong figure in the family. One woman in Tucson described her mother's role this way:

For my brother, it was good enough to graduate from high school, the whole family was proud of him. My sister graduated from high school, and mom pushed her more. She went to a two-year school. So I am her third child, I'm the one that has to go to a four-year college. That doesn't mean she doesn't love us all the same, but that is what she expects of me. I need to get education to improve myself so I can help other people.

It takes a lot, in other words, for a young person to successfully navigate the transition from high school to college. Financial resources are a big part of the equation, of course, but the presence or absence of adult knowledge and support is, if the stories we heard are representative, even more definitive. In the success stories, then, there seemed to be adults who were willing to work with the students over a sustained period. Unfortunately, other students did not have this resource to draw on.

Other Resources

The following studies add to our understanding of Hispanic high school seniors and their parents.

John Immerwahr with Tony Foleno. *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African-American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education*. San Jose, CA: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and Public Agenda, 2000. This national survey documents the importance that parents, and especially Hispanic parents, place on college education for their children.

Louis G. Tornatzky, Richard Cutler, and Jongho Lee. *College Knowledge: What Latino Parents Need to Know and Why They Don't Know It*. Claremont, CA: Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, 2002. This study focuses on the parents of Hispanic students, and documents the degree to which many are poorly informed about basic information regarding higher education.

Richard Fry. *Latinos in Higher Education: Many Enroll, Too Few Graduate*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center, 2002. This report reviews college participation statistics for Hispanic students and concludes that while many Hispanic students are enrolled in postsecondary education, most of these are following paths that are less likely to result in completion of a college degree.

Conclusion

Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education began this study by asking why Hispanic students are less likely to attend and complete college, even though their parents seem to believe in the importance of a college education. Obviously, there are many factors, and lack of financial resources is surely one of the most important. But our research also points to the possibility of other obstacles that are less tangible and that have received less attention among policymakers. What our research suggests is that the decision to go to college requires a certain degree of knowledge, guidance, and even faith in long-term rewards over short-term gains. Hispanic high school students are hardly unique in their lack of information or failure to understand the long-term consequences of their actions. Yet they may be a somewhat distinctive group in

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their lack of support from knowledgeable, education-savvy adults who can help overcome this typical teenage deficiency. The success stories uncovered in this series of focus groups reflect the presence of strong adults, as the lost opportunities reflect the lack.

Our emphasis here has been on those Hispanic students we call the college-maybes, but it seems obvious that the non-college-bound students are also missing out in alarming ways. In today's high-tech, knowledge-intensive economy, many of these students need intensive academic remediation and some sort of postsecondary training if they are to find productive jobs and satisfying lives. Although we did not probe the specific needs of this at-risk group in this study, we did observe the same kind of misinformation and lack of adult guidance. Whether these youngsters displayed a lot of college potential or very little, the most common situation was that no one was helping them sort out their futures in any individual way. Too many were left on their own, and our fear is that too many will end up paying a price.

Afterword

The data have become irrefutable. As the United States struggles with the social and economic challenges of the 21st century, the supply of highly educated young adults with the necessary range of training and skills appears to be dwindling. Although the country is experiencing a dramatic increase in the numbers of young people who are reaching their early twenties, more and more of them are recent immigrants, members of minority groups who are inadequately prepared to meet the demands of a dramatically changed workplace.

Research by Public Agenda has shown that large numbers of these youngsters and their parents aspire to an education that would allow them to take their place in the new economy, yet for one reason or another, their educational preparation has given them few of the skills that are required in the 21st century. The gap in educational achievement between minority youngsters and their non-Hispanic white peers cannot help but undermine their social aspirations, the needs of the economy, and, one might even say, the fundamental requirements of a democracy that depends upon an educated citizenry.

The findings presented here make clear how essential it will be for higher education to address the needs of Hispanic students—and other minorities—as they struggle to find their way into the secure life.

It has become common knowledge that, among minority groups, Hispanics are the largest and fastest growing segment of the country's population, and data regularly suggest that Hispanic youngsters evidence the most severe educational disadvantages. College professors and administrators are prone to point to a failure in their academic preparation in K–12 schools as the culprit, and often throw their hands up in despair when called upon to compensate for this. While many educators themselves acknowledge that inadequate preparation may indeed be a significant part of the problem, it is also true that, increasingly, there are calls upon institutions responsible for higher education in America to find ways to ameliorate the situation.

The findings presented here make clear how essential it will be for higher education to address the needs of Hispanic students—and other minorities—as they struggle to find their way into the secure life we all aspire to in the United States. This pilot project (along with several other recent studies) has begun the process of diagnosing the sources of the problem. We are a long way from developing effective responses to these challenging issues, but surely, one implication of the work so far is that a more probing and inclusive study might well be helpful in crafting appropriate solutions.

In this study, members of our advisory group have called for "new research and new creative thinking." Public Agenda hopes very much to continue to contribute to that process.

Deborah Wadsworth
President
Public Agenda

Commentary by Advisory Group Members

Opening the Discussion

By Arturo Madrid

The findings of this study need to be put in the context of some larger developments regarding the Latino population in this country. There are four factors that I would like to touch upon to open the frame of this discussion.

1. *Growth.* There are extraordinary implications regarding the growth of the Latino population, which is now over 12% of the population of the United States. And because it is such a young population, it makes up a very high percentage of the potential college-bound population, especially in states such as California, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, Illinois, and New York. Another area of change is the percentage of Latinos who are American-born. At the beginning of the 1980s, over 70% of the Latinos in this country were born here. Now that percentage is dropping, so that today, perhaps only about half of Latinos were born in this country, with a much larger percentage of recent immigrants.

Attitudes such as "you do not vote" or "you do not do well in school" remain prevalent.

2. *Residential segregation.* Despite our efforts in the middle decades of the last century, Latinos are again highly segregated residentially. Latinos often live in poor neighborhoods, with poor school districts. Furthermore, there is a cultural segregation. Despite many successful efforts to change social attitudes toward Latinos, certain cultural perceptions about them are still widespread. Attitudes such as "you do not vote" or "you do not do well in school" remain prevalent. What is at issue here are the difficulties caused by certain cultural attitudes, coupled with a retreat from the effort to find public policy resolutions for addressing issues, such as residential segregation, that contribute to inferior educational development.

3. *Retreat from ethnic and cultural programming.* In the period from the 1960s through the 1980s, the programs that moved young Latino (and black) students through high school and on to college were essentially ethnic-based or culturally based national programs. Students were provided support and programming based on their ethnicity, and these approaches had many successes. Today, however, there are restrictions to implementing

racial-ethnic programming, as we have seen in Texas and California, as well as complications to sustaining them at their current levels. So far, we have not found other ways to accomplish the same goals.

4. *Reaching out.* As this report indicates, we have been remarkably successful in reaching one group of Latino middle-class students, so that today they are not really any different from other middle-class students. As important as this accomplishment has been, it should not obscure the difficulty of reaching out to the next group. These are the students who might have the potential but who do not know how to translate that potential into performance. Here again, we need to find new techniques and approaches.

What we have, in other words, is a Latino population that is growing both in size and importance, but many of the approaches that we have depended on to recruit and retain Latino students are no longer adequate. All of this calls for new research and new creative thinking, and I hope this report will provide a stimulus to take additional steps.

Arturo Madrid is the Norine R. and T. Frank Murchison Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at Trinity University. He has served as founding president of the Tomás Rivera Center; director of the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) in the U.S. Department of Education; director of the Ford Foundation's Graduate Fellowship Program for Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Puerto Ricans; and founder and president of the National Chicano Council for Higher Education. He has also held academic and administrative appointments at Dartmouth College, the University of California at San Diego, and the University of Minnesota. Madrid has a Ph.D. from the University of California at Los Angeles.

Building a Consensus for Equity

By Alfredo G. de los Santos Jr.

Let me begin by reiterating a point about the size of the Latino population. In the 2000 census, one in every eight persons in the United States was Latino. Already in New Mexico, the majority of high school graduates are Latino, and soon enough it will be true in Texas, California, New York, and Florida. Of course, many Latino students don't graduate from high school at all. In Arizona, 50% of the students who begin 9th grade drop out before graduation. So our country is facing a massive task, and this study and the new study by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute both point in the same direction. We need to know much more about these students, and we need to find ways to increase the percentage of them who will be ready for a college education.

Arturo Madrid discussed some of the limitations that we face in working with this population, but I would like to mention yet another one, dealing with the issue of building political support from the population at large for programs to address the needs of Latino students.

Let's look for a moment at some of the efforts to eliminate illiteracy and innumeracy. We have had some tremendous successes in this area. Texas, for example, has made remarkable strides. In Texas, the gap between white school children and all other school children on NAEP test scores has substantially narrowed.

How was this done in Texas? In part it was based on building public support. The public has come to understand that having a large population of children without literacy and numeracy skills is bad public policy for everyone. The public understands that it is in the interest of the whole society to address this issue. There is tremendous support, in other words, for equity at the K–8 level. We need to build on the success in some states and bring the same methods to other states that have been less successful.

The next challenge, which may be more difficult, is to build the same case for equity throughout K–16 (or even K–20).

The next challenge, which may be more difficult, is to build the same case for equity throughout K–16 (or even K–20). Here we face new and different problems, because the public perceives these as areas of competition among students. In effect, some parents may start by asking themselves, "If there is real equity throughout K–12, won't that hurt my own child's chances?" In other words, we haven't completely made the case that wider access to higher education is in everyone's interest, not just something that is of benefit to those who get that higher education.

The research done by Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education shows that the public is just beginning to think

this through. The most recent national surveys show that nearly everyone believes that society needs more college-educated workers (as opposed to survey results from several years ago, which showed that the public at that time was worried about having too many over-educated people). Yet according to the more recent surveys, the public still places primary emphasis on individual responsibility for attaining a higher education, and believes that the benefits of higher education go primarily to individuals. Also, people see college dropouts as a problem for those individuals who drop out, rather than for society as a whole. Our task is to build on the emerging values to create a consensus for equity at the higher levels of education.

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A Challenge and an Opportunity for Policy

By Marlene L. Garcia

Even addressing the suggestions raised by the report itself, it is useful to re-emphasize the problem that led to the research in the first place. Although Hispanic parents are significantly more likely to emphasize the value of a college education for their children, those children are less likely to pursue and succeed in getting a college education. The report focuses our attention on the need to close that gap between hopes and reality.

We may need to explore very different policy approaches to deal with different groups of students, based on their socioeconomic status.

Turning to the report itself, one of the most striking findings is the reaffirmation of the diversity of the Hispanic population. It is a commonplace among policymakers that the Hispanic community is highly diverse, but often when people say that, they are referring to the differences among groups such as Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Cubans, Dominicans, or Colombians. While these differences are very real, the report also points to equally significant differences in class, and highlights how these differences can affect the decision-making process to attend college. What the report suggests is that we may need to explore very different policy approaches to deal with different groups of students, based on their socioeconomic status. Even the preliminary results here suggest some important policy implications.

1. *Need for more research.* The more we study the policymaking process, the more we see the importance of policy-oriented research. Legislators and other policymakers are, by nature, activists; they want to solve problems. But without research, legislators can spend too much of their time reacting to very specific issues and dealing with the needs of individual constituents. Research provides a thermometer indicating other, equally important issues, where there are specific needs or where there is a critical mass of opinion that may support creative policy solutions.

2. *Focusing on the "college-maybes."* The preliminary findings in this report suggest that to increase access for Hispanic students, policymakers need to target efforts on the "college-maybe" students. While the needs of the college-prep students are very important, we can see that when it comes to attendance at undergraduate institutions, they do not necessarily need a customized approach. In effect, the research suggests that they need roughly what we are providing to other middle-class students. By contrast,

the findings imply that we need much more research and creativity in addressing the needs of the "college-maybe" group and the "non-college-bound" students. In what follows, I'll concentrate mostly on the "college-maybes," but clearly just as much attention is required for the other group as well. (Although it is outside the scope of this report, there are some indications that Hispanic students who are very successful in making the transition from high school to college may have problems making the transition to graduate school. In effect, many of the best Hispanic college students lag behind other groups in making decisions about graduate studies.)

3. *Sustained support.* The research suggests that middle-class students receive sustained support for going on to higher education. These students experience an expectation from parents and teachers that they will go on to college, and at every step of the way they receive guidance and information. As the report indicates, the process of preparing a young person for college is a remarkably complex task, with midcourse corrections all along the way. The college-maybes clearly don't have these natural support systems in place. Sporadic information sessions may reach a few students, but they will not do the whole job. We need to find ways to emulate some of the sustained support received by middle-class students.

4. *Breadth and depth of support.* In addition to the need for support that is sustained over time, the report also suggests a need for major changes to the academic infrastructure. A perfectly logical response to this report, for example, is to assume that what is needed is an upgraded system of guidance counselors. This is part of the picture, but if these preliminary findings are correct, it is probably a mistake to think that counselors alone can do the job. These students need support from parents, teachers, and peers, as well as from counselors. Although teachers are already concerned that they are "maxed-out" and cannot take on any additional responsibilities, we need to train teachers to be better able to identify and support students who have college potential, and parents also need much more education. We also need to find ways to help parents be more supportive.

The research provides both a challenge and an opportunity to policymakers. It identifies an important target population, but also suggests that although these students have high potential, significant changes may be required to actualize that potential.

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Low Expectations Equal Low Outcomes

By Jaime A. Molera

The findings in this report reinforce public perceptions about how and why some Hispanic students fall into a mindset that makes it difficult for them to go on to college.

We know that there are at least two impediments for many Hispanic students. On the one hand there are financial impediments; the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education does a good job showing us how, in many areas, the costs to the student are increasing, while financial aid is either unavailable or inadequate.[9] Money, however, is not the only obstacle. There are academic issues as well, and these are equally important and in some ways more difficult to deal with. Unless we can address them, we will not succeed.

In this country, we like to say that we abhor tracking, and that tracking is the European way, not the American way. But the study suggests that there is a system of tracking for many Hispanic students that starts early and is very persistent. One of the main keys to this *de facto* system of tracking is expectations. Let's start with the group that the report calls the "college-prep" students. These students don't just magically decide they want to go to college when they become high school seniors. These are the same kids who come to kindergarten already knowing the alphabet and the numbers. This starts with the expectations of the parents, but soon it translates into expectations by the teachers and the other students as well. In effect, these students start their schooling with a little academic nest egg of expectations and preparation, and that nest egg earns compounded interest over the next 12 years. At every stage of the process, these students are doing well and are receiving the guidance they need, and their readiness for further work grows as they go along. As a result, they become the "college-prep" students that the researchers interviewed, poised for a good college experience, perhaps graduate school after that, and a good career.

The "non-college-bound students" are just the reverse. If you look at a lot of these children at a young age, you'll find that their parents also believe and hope that they will go to college. In real terms, however, the expectations are different for these students. They may have moved from school to school, and usually don't get a strong academic foundation from either parents or teachers. Soon the idea develops in their own minds that they are not like "those kids

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[9] See, for instance, *Losing Ground: A National Status Report on the Affordability of American Higher Education* (San Jose, CA: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002).

who go to college." When they meet a financial or other obstacle, it further reinforces the expectation that they are not destined for college-level work.

The "college-maybes" are in the middle. They have some motivation, but they are also very fragile. Without that built-up nest egg of expectations, they are easily knocked off track, or distracted by the idea that maybe they can postpone college for a few years or maybe go start a business first.

The report reinforces the concern that college attendance is only one symptom of a more pervasive system of tracking by expectations.

What all this suggests is that while as a society we say that we believe that "no child should be left behind," we don't always put our money and our actions behind our words. If we really believed those words, it would have tremendous and radical policy implications for dozens of different areas, from how we finance schools and hold them accountable, to how we train teachers. To take just one example identified in the report, many students move from school to school as their parents move from neighborhood to neighborhood. A real commitment to student education would also mean that we would have to look at things like affordable home ownership, to give children and families the stability they need.

In total, then, the report reinforces the concern that college attendance is only one symptom of a more pervasive system of tracking by expectations.

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About the Author

John Immerwahr is a senior research fellow with Public Agenda and associate vice president for academic affairs at Villanova University. He is the author or co-author of numerous Public Agenda reports on higher education, including: *Meeting the Competition: College and University Presidents, Faculty, and State Legislators View the New Competitive Academic Arena* (2002); *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African-American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education* (2000); and *Doing Comparatively Well: Why the Public Loves Higher Education and Criticizes K–12* (1999). In addition, he has authored and co-authored a number of other Public Agenda reports on education, including *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (1994).

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With Diploma in Hand: Hispanic High School Seniors Talk About Their Future, by John Immerwahr (June 2003, #03-2). This report by Public Agenda explores some of the primary obstacles that many Hispanic students face in seeking higher education, barriers which suggest opportunities for creative public policy to improve college attendance and completion rates among Hispanics.

Purposes, Policies, Performance: Higher Education and the Fulfillment of a State's Public Agenda (February 2003, #03-1). This essay is drawn from discussions of higher education leaders and policy officials at a roundtable convened in June 2002 at New

Jersey City University on the relationship between public purposes, policies, and performance of American higher education.

Measuring Up 2002: The State-by-State Report Card for Higher Education (October 2002, #02-7). This report card, which updates the inaugural edition released in 2000, grades each state on its performance in five key areas of higher education. *Measuring Up 2002* also evaluates each state's progress in relation to its own results from 2000. Visit **www.highereducation.org** to download *Measuring Up 2002* or to make your own comparisons of state performance in higher education. Printed copies are available for $25.00 by calling 888-269-3652 (discounts available for large orders).

Technical Guide Documenting Methodology, Indicators, and Data Sources for Measuring Up 2002 (October 2002, #02-8).

State Policy and Community College–Baccalaureate Transfer, by Jane V. Wellman (July 2002, #02-6). Recommends state policies to energize and improve higher education performance regarding transfers from community colleges to four-year institutions.

Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education: The Early Years (June 2002, #02-5). The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) attained remarkable success in funding innovative and enduring projects during its early years. This report, prepared by FIPSE's early program officers, describes how those results were achieved.

Losing Ground: A National Status Report on the Affordability of American Higher Education (May 2002, #02-3). This national status report documents the declining affordability of higher education for American families, and highlights public policies that support affordable higher education. Provides state-by-state summaries as well as national findings.

The Affordability of Higher Education: A Review of Recent Survey Research, by John Immerwahr (May 2002, #02-4). This review of recent surveys by Public Agenda confirms that Americans feel that rising college prices threaten to make higher education inaccessible for many people.

Coping with Recession: Public Policy, Economic Downturns, and Higher Education, by Patrick M. Callan (February 2002, #02-2). Outlines the major policy considerations that states and institutions of higher education face during economic downturns.

Competition and Collaboration in California Higher Education, by Kathy Reeves Bracco and Patrick M. Callan (January 2002, #02-1). Argues that the structure of California's state higher education system limits the system's capacity for collaboration.

Measuring Up 2000: The State-by-State Report Card for Higher Education (November 2000, #00-3). This first-of-its-kind report card grades each state on its performance in higher education. The report card also provides comprehensive profiles of each state and brief states-at-a-glance comparisons. Visit **www.highereducation.org** to download *Measuring Up 2000* or to make your own comparisons of state performance in higher education. Printed copies are available for $25.00 by calling 888-269-3652 (discounts available for large orders).

***Beneath the Surface: A Statistical Analysis of the Major Variables Associated with State Grades in* Measuring Up 2000,** by Alisa F. Cunningham and Jane V. Wellman (November 2001, #01-4). Using statistical analysis, this report explores the "drivers" that predict overall performance in *Measuring Up 2000.*

Supplementary Analysis for* Measuring Up 2000: *An Exploratory Report, by Mario Martinez (November 2001, #01-3). Explores the relationships within and between the performance categories in *Measuring Up 2000.*

***Some Next Steps for States: A Follow-up to* Measuring Up 2000,** by Dennis Jones and Karen Paulson (June 2001, #01-2). Suggests a range of actions that states can take to bridge the gap between state performance identified in *Measuring Up 2000* and the formulation of effective policy to improve performance in higher education.

***A Review of Tests Performed on the Data in* Measuring Up 2000,** by Peter Ewell (June 2001, #01-1). Describes the statistical testing performed on the data in *Measuring Up 2000* by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

***Recent State Policy Initiatives in Education: A Supplement to* Measuring Up 2000,** by Aims McGuinness, Jr. (December 2000, #00-6). Highlights education initiatives that states have adopted since 1997-98.

***Assessing Student Learning Outcomes: A Supplement to* Measuring Up 2000,** by Peter Ewell and Paula Ries (December 2000, #00-5). National survey of state efforts to assess student learning outcomes in higher education.

***Technical Guide Documenting Methodology, Indicators and Data Sources for* Measuring Up 2000** (November 2000, #00-4).

A State-by-State Report Card on Higher Education: Prospectus (March 2000, #00-1). Summarizes the goals of the National Center's report card project.

Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African-American and Hispanic—View Higher Education, by John Immerwahr with Tony Foleno (May 2000, #00-2). This report by Public Agenda finds that Americans overwhelmingly see higher education as essential for success. Survey results are also available for the following states:

Great Expectations: How Pennsylvanians View Higher Education (May 2000, #00-2b)
Great Expectations: How Floridians View Higher Education (August 2000, #00-2c)
Great Expectations: How Coloradans View Higher Education (August 2000, #00-2d)
Great Expectations: How Californians View Higher Education (August 2000, #00-2e)
Great Expectations: How New Yorkers View Higher Education (October 2000, #00-2f)
Great Expectations: How Illinois Residents View Higher Education (October 2000, #00-2h)

State Spending for Higher Education in the Next Decade: The Battle to Sustain Current Support, by Harold A. Hovey (July 1999, #99-3). This fiscal forecast of state and local spending patterns finds that the vast majority of states will face significant fiscal deficits over the next eight years, which will in turn lead to increased scrutiny of higher education in almost all states, and to curtailed spending for public higher education in many states.

South Dakota: Developing Policy-Driven Change in Higher Education, by Mario Martinez (June 1999, #99-2). Describes the processes for change in higher education that government, business, and higher education leaders are creating and implementing in South Dakota.

Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education, by John Immerwahr (January 1999, #99-1). Reports the views of those most involved with decision making about higher education, based on a survey and focus groups conducted by Public Agenda.

The Challenges and Opportunities Facing Higher Education: An Agenda for Policy Research, by Dennis Jones, Peter Ewell, and Aims McGuinness (December 1998, #98-8). Argues that due to substantial changes in the landscape of postsecondary education, new state-level policy frameworks must be developed and implemented.

Higher Education Governance: Balancing Institutional and Market Influences, by Richard C. Richardson, Jr., Kathy Reeves Bracco, Patrick M. Callan, and Joni E. Finney (November 1998, #98-7). Describes the structural relationships that affect institutional effectiveness in higher education, and argues that state policy should strive for a balance between institutional and market forces.

Federal Tuition Tax Credits and State Higher Education Policy: A Guide for State Policy Makers, by Kristin D. Conklin (December 1998, #98-6). Examines the implications of the federal income tax provisions for students and their families, and makes recommendations for state higher education policy.

The Challenges Facing California Higher Education: A Memorandum to the Next Governor of California, by David W. Breneman (September 1998, #98-5). Argues that California should develop a new Master Plan for Higher Education.

Tidal Wave II Revisited: A Review of Earlier Enrollment Projections for California Higher Education, by Gerald C. Hayward, David W. Breneman, and Leobardo F. Estrada (September 1998, #98-4). Finds that earlier forecasts of a surge in higher education enrollments were accurate.

Organizing for Learning: The View from the Governor's Office, by James B. Hunt Jr., chair of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and former governor of North Carolina (June 1998, #98-3). An address to the American Association for Higher Education concerning opportunity in higher education.

The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education, by John Immerwahr (Spring 1998, #98-2). A national survey of Americans' views on higher education, conducted and reported by Public Agenda.

Concept Paper: A National Center to Address Higher Education Policy, by Patrick M. Callan (March 1998, #98-1). Describes the purposes of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

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